Francesc Costa
There, and on Foot

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For those who travelled with me —
through sunlit days and open roads,
and within the quiet beauty of everyday life —
I remember every name
I know who you are.

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About walking, about seeing. Through forests, forgotten paths, ruined farmhouses, and ancient roads, a landscape unfolds — written in history, held in memory, alive in nature. This is a celebration of slow travel, of attentive observation, of the enduring dialogue between people and the land they inhabit. Not merely mountain walks, but a lifelong way of reading the world — through paths, ruins, forests, and silence — a quiet search for what endures: memory, presence, and the hidden meaning of place. There, and on foot.

Beneath the snow

I know a secluded place, with no marked paths, amid the ruin of fallen trunks and tangled undergrowth — roots blocking the way, and a rise encircled by the last traces of old farmland. I venture in, guided by a half-forgotten account, and find the remains of a collapsed house where the echoes of an old tragedy still linger. Winter, sometime in the eighteen-hundreds — days of endless snow, an eternal shroud. A peasant family, driven by hunger, abandons their home and stumbles blindly into the blizzard, toward death. They never reach the village. The cold takes them — eight white corpses in the silence.

At the roofless house

I lose myself in the mountain forests and leave the paths behind. To find, you must leave the paths. Right now, amid scrub and holm oaks, beside towering pines and above terraced fields that are history itself, with no solid track underfoot, I have come upon a tiny house that once belonged to a tenant farmer who tended vineyards in the nineteenth century. Without a roof, the sun enters — and the rain, when its turn comes. Solid walls, still waiting for the wind to undo them. Memories of beams, of doors and windows. And a surprise: on the walls, where the plaster has fallen away, a clay pot appears, set into a niche. This is where the farmers kept their savings — wrapped with care, then sealed beneath a layer of lime to hide the hollow. Fear lived here, among shadows and the murmur of trees. Solid light, now, on a lucky day. Solitary ruin. Total defeat.

Footsteps of fear and light

The first time I died, it was by an oak tree brushed with autumn, because the car couldn't keep up with the feeling. Now you'll find me on foot, along ancient paths, among moss and scents, where people once walked—though it was never easy: thieves, and wind. This gentle six-kilometre stretch, crossed by so many through so much, centuries ago, I've walked myself. On foot—that instrument of knowledge that lets you look, and sit—pine forest and birds.

In few places does nature obey man quite the way it does here. Or rather, the landscape is an invention shaped by the old habit of needing to eat every day. Those dark, wild forests once full of ambushers with shotguns are now ploughed fields, and houses where city people come to rest. Everything is predictable now: round a bend, and you already know nothing will happen. Sad, mathematical groves. Nature—useful, under control—a legacy of the French Revolution, which taught us symmetry, and blood.

All at once, soft green slopes tell you you've arrived where a genteel game is played, the old road running straight through its middle. We salute these leisure grounds, stolen from the forest. The struggle against the irrational, destructive force of those airy seeds the liberal wind scatters without order. We like nature. The image of nature. The dream of nature. One afternoon, as I stood admiring a splendid mountain range under the evening sun, a farmer came up and told me he'd had quite enough of it all. Those of us who live sheltered lives look at mountains and see beauty; for the farmer, they are centuries of struggle against nature. We've killed off wolves—and microbes.

Small histories of the road, and of the forest that is no longer there. A swiss traveller passed through here in the

sixteenth century and warned that this was the most dangerous forest in the country, where you might lose your way, or fall into the hands of murderers. Three hundred years later, someone walking here still shudders in these deep woods. Dense holm oak groves that frightened everyone—there were bears here once, like the one that killed king Favila.

From Franciac we pass through the Tiona, an isolated inn that suffered greatly during the French wars, where travellers used to stop to eat badly and sleep worse. Then the crossroads toward the coast, with the riddle of the Cross of the Hand, pointing the way to Montserrat—medieval hope made stone. Along the stream of Belladona—whom I would have liked to know, and keep as a friend. The Vallcanera lies within reach, with its long-missed farmhouses. And we stop on the street of the Mallorquines, taking in the old route. We'll eat lunch remembering that the innkeeper of this corner of the world, one Joan Martí, married in Besalú in 1652—a refuge for my ancestors—a girl who washed her clothes in the Fluvià.

The french writer Jules Lacroix de Marlès tells of his character Gustave passing through these parts in the mid-nineteenth century. At Tiona, dinner was roast chicken and a chicken fricassee, served with a salad dressed in oil so foul it announced itself from across the room. Gustave asks his companion, Monsieur Germon, how the oil can be so bad when there are as many olive trees here as in Provence, and a climate mild enough that it ought to be excellent. Germon agrees entirely—the olives, the soil, the climate, all of it is fine—but says the catalans ruin what nature gives them: after the harvest they pile the olives into built cisterns and leave them to ferment before pressing, which is why the oil comes out strong and rank. And yet, he adds, the catalans

notice nothing wrong with it, and insist Provençal oil has no flavour at all.

The poet Robert Southey makes the same complaint, grumbling that in this land of olive trees they poison visitors with the foulest oil, letting the fruit turn rancid before pressing it. Stendhal, dining in Mataró, is horrified to find both lettuce and fish dressed in the same rank oil, and rinses everything under the tap. But this is not a story about oil. It is a story about roads. About that one afternoon when I set out to find the living remains of a thousand-year-old route, sacred and royal—to come a little closer to a time when simply going where you had to go was an adventure in itself.

Sic transit, silentium manet

On a quiet wall, amid this silence, a touch of colour carries me back to the past of the carthusian monastery of Montalegre, which I am visiting now with a friend, alone through its empty galleries. At the top of the image, the path leading to the Conreria, the monks' working estate, where they brought the fruits of their lands to rest. Beside it, a line of crosses marks the Stations of the Cross; a friar at prayer intercedes for us all, while two descending figures are about to meet farmers and a mule on their way to the terraced fields. Trees, now gone, accompany the gaze across this gentle scene.

Then, the solid mass of the charterhouse, its stones holding decades within them. Scenes of life. Friars at the windows of their cells, lay brothers tending the kitchen gardens, the irrigation pond, the poultry cage, the shepherd. Closer still, a lay brother working the hoe, and two friars murmuring before Saint Bruno. Order — everything in its place — and the birds in the sky. It is not paradise: some work, others watch. And the skull, bringing us back down to earth.

Stones of the ridge

they bid me farewell, as I linger, imagining the landscape of hell as the Italian master describes it and the french draughtsman renders it. «Abandon hope, all ye who enter». Yet here, amid the mountains that roof the coastal plain, there are places the devil himself might look upon with favour, for they resemble what those who have done everything wrong deserve. Shelters of martyrdom, set among the pines. The Rocks of Sardinyà, the Roca Negra, the Encantades — and the most unsettling of all, at Labaià, with its giant boulders. But to grasp the penitential atmosphere that pervades these regions beyond Lethe, one must come on the right day. Arrive at noon in August, packed lunch in hand, and the place may even make you laugh. I will wait for you on an autumn night, in the rain, so you may be guided by lightning, following the music of thunder and the ceaseless dripping. In black and white. The backdrop of the final road.

Forgotten path

At the pass of the spring that no longer exists, a path begins that few have known, amid a thicket of dense trees that let no light through, and rocks worn smooth by medieval feet. I have walked it alone, and the cathedral of branches overwhelms you. There is no one here, and nature has reclaimed the old terraced fields where Gordi once grew his vines — a crumbling stone hut or two still bears witness. Walk without haste; look and listen. On the shaded slope of Cabús hill, it is a blessing to pass this way when the summer heat presses down, and to lose yourself. It is a kilometre and little more, but you will emerge from this primordial world into civilisation, changed.

Where the witches are no more

Through the hollow of Rials, in this most unrepentant of months. You would never guess that, leaving Dosrius beneath the plane trees—faithful keepers of shade—a hidden path opens up that you have to walk. The trees that follow the now-dry streambed are not sacred, no memory here like the Pi de la Teula, and yet I have walked among them feeling the presence of water, damp moss clothing the stones along the banks. Sound keeps you company on these unmarked paths, which thorny plants are slowly reclaiming. Go to Rials, go now, before you lose the chance to enjoy a corner watched over only by unhurried wild boar. Riverside hollows, and a ceiling of leaves.

In the dark centuries of history, in some equally dark mountain village, amid wild forests and the fear of night, stories of witches around the fire took on shapes that were not quite real. In Dosrius, a hundred years ago, the disciples of Satan lay in wait, and had a meeting place where the supreme being of evil appeared in the form of a goat: the Devil's Rock, by the Rials stream, along the path toward Llinars.

Sitting beneath the holm oaks, sheltered from the heat, you can still hear the stories held in memory—marvels that happened here and were lost at some unlucky hour. They say a wicked witch once drove a nail into a child's head to torment him; later they pulled it out and dressed the wound with lard. One day, from a stone hut, Pau Fonseca saw old Guinarda turn into a fox, and when he threatened to tell, she promised him good harvests for as long as she lived if he kept quiet—and so it was. The livestock of Ramon Batlle Juvany fell to a strange sickness, his sheep dying, because that same Guinarda, in the form of a rat, was poisoning

them. When she died, on the day of her funeral, the bell's clapper fell three times as it rang, and that very afternoon a great storm of rain and hail broke—that was how she took her leave of the world.

Paths scarred with tracks. And the farmhouses of people who are no longer here, from a time when life filled this place and work ruled the terraced fields. Can Gregori, swallowed by brambles, though the bread oven still remains. The crumbling walls of Can Capa, Casanova, Can Fornaret. The scent of pine resin. The silence of forgetting—you will not find a soul.

You have to imagine a windy night. Lightning and thunder announcing winter. The livestock restless. We must set the scene, because a hidden corner is waiting. We cannot leave without laying a hand on the stones where the greatest sorcerer of these parts once lived. Polaina took refuge in a stone house that still bears his name—now a ruin. We push through the brambles to the lair of this wicked man, who sold his soul to the devil to pay his taxes. He lived in constant conflict, defending his place, and once again it was Ramon Batlle who paid the price, having refused to take Polaina in as a tenant: Polaina made him lose his harvest seven years running. Today you, tomorrow your neighbour—no one in the village could bear the sight of him. And yet one day Polaina abandoned his crooked ways, repented, and paid what he owed. Even now, the stones of his old wolfish den remain.

What stories Rials holds. Uneasy, a little breathless, we set off on the way back—straight along the ridge, crossing the flats of Can Brunet, Can Vallmajor, Can Xino, land worn by sun and water. Soon, the castle: a lone wall standing watch over the village below, perched above the paths. Since time immemorial it had belonged to the priory of Sant Pere de Casserres, monks who, beside the river Ter, lived well on

generous revenues. One day the people of Dosrius bought the lordship for themselves; later, an heiress married into the Castellà family. Two hundred years on, another heiress married a Sentmenat—who now preside over the ruins. The last stretch of a Sunday, burning fossil fuel on the way home—because home is where you must end up.

Death's round

The Traià range, threaded with narrow trails that never seem to end, a landscape of overlooked corners, almost jungle at times—though a hundred years ago these were bare hills clothed in vines. Now the pines are dying from the blight that gnaws at them, and perhaps one day we will see again those smooth slopes from the old postcards—but without the knowing hand of the people who once worked them.

Along a root-tangled path, brushing past the pig house that gives itself away from a distance. Winding steps, a confusion of crossroads. Still, we know we are heading for a great, handsome pine beside a weekend cottage, and we reach it—still generous, dropping cones in season—but this old survivor is dying, like so many of its kind along these paths. Misfortune spreads across the Marina hills, a cloud of blight. Gnawed and broken along the tracks, the trunks wait like a shipwreck. How will I ever explain to my children that all of this was once green.

Walls of a convent steeped in medieval spirituality, and I come closer to point out the pine of Gallifa, the remains of a giant, perhaps torn apart by lightning. Here, in the mid-nineteenth century, men from Argentona murdered a councillor from Mataró of that name, for money. It ended badly for them: five of the gang were executed on the beach before a silent crowd.

Onward toward the house of the elegant horses, along trails that rise and fall, shaded and pleasant, on this spring day when everything is in colour and the air carries thyme and rosemary. A walk through the most stubborn kind of botany: beneath pines, among holm oaks, in shade and in sun, all the way to the stony climb where the path begins to

give way. To close the unhurried day, I cross a shaded hollow of pencil-thin trees, the stream running dry, as it almost always does—and when it does not, it is frightening.

Dying pines, the memory of a crime, and the everlasting flower—the bloom of cemeteries, with its faint oriental scent. What a day. What a night.

Wandering through stone and silence

You like climbing mountains and discovering that the world does not end, but I am more of a forest person, drawn to green canopies that shift with the seasons. I hide from the sun along a path that follows the Martinet stream—few places offer the quiet pleasures of nature quite like this country of grass, dressed differently each time I walk it. Scraped red walls open into caves beneath box trees, and charcoal mounds remain from when the forest was a trade. The terraces are being swallowed by vegetation now—people once worked here—and the mountain is really a staircase of landings, though you would never know it, hidden beneath the holm oaks. Vineyards recall the days when ships carried this gold across the sea to distant lands, and everywhere there are stones—ruins that once offered shelter from bad weather.

The crest of the Arca range, a plateau of gentle slopes, still holds the memory of Iberian inhabitants who left their mark here more than a thousand years ago—Montgròs, as it is called now. It is time to speak of ruins, because I love ruins, the great shipwreck of things. Casanova, passing near Roman Saguntum, says he wants to visit it; his companions are not interested. «There is nothing there but ruins, sir. — That is precisely what I want to see».

Toward the crumbling houses: memory. Can Brucdemí, green stones eaten by moss—here, humidity decides everything—beneath the trees, along a path that invites you to peer into corners kept from passing feet. The farmhouse of Saüc was once grand: a doorway open to the sky, a wooden lintel that will soon give way, and after that nothing will remain to bring the place back to life. The ribs of Can

Serra de l'Arca, which someone ought to restore. Lords of old land, open gaze, a balcony over the vast Montseny.

I make my way toward the Saní along a scraped red path that seems endless, beneath great rocks reaching for the sky. I will get there—to the four walls that still remember a building set on a panoramic hillside. First, a narrow trail draws you toward the house's spring—little more than a trickle. You have to place your steps carefully here, because there are two tempting paths: one that climbs to the edge of the cliff, and a flat one through the forest, which I take. As you walk, you find stone shelters worn down by time, a wallow where wild boar bathe, and a companionable silence filled with birdsong.

There are more corners of stone with a past: El Brollet, Can Berlana, Can Mirabò, Cal Cabrer, Can Bauma. All of it is the memory of people who left when the vineyards died, or earlier, when smoking, coal-burning factories became—for young people living hard, precarious lives—the promise of the city. The Casanova house at Can Serra still holds some substance, and you can imagine the life of the farmer and his children there. And the woman with bread in the oven, which still stands. In ruins, I am always searching for that trace of warmth, of lived life.

You move on past broken dolmens, hermitages, the manor house of Aiguafreda de Dalt, and above it an impossible house—Les Queredes—hanging there, a mystery. What were Manuel, Quimeta, and the children doing up there? Perched beneath crumbling, precarious cliffs. A path of greenish scree climbs toward it, and I sit among the few walls that in a few years will no longer be there, my eyes fixed on the distance. A balcony over the Bertí cliffs. And one day, feeling bold, I climbed the Torrent dels Morts—the Ravine of the Dead—said to be the path the old people from

the farmhouses took on their final journey down, along that vertiginous drop.

But even though I am a forest person, one of deep shade and a certain solitude, I could change my mind in a flowering plain that opens as you descend along a wide path, walking among pines, crossing the grove of Can Serra. A burst of spring light: blue sky, the gardens of Centelles, and distant cliffs framing Vilargent—stones balanced, fewer each time, on what was once a fortunate little farm above the fog of Vic, a white sheet I once crossed while climbing a mountain, and then, suddenly, the sun.

I come back down to the hollow of Martinet, to the pool of Roquerols, among branches, autumn leaves, and a little water echoing in the falls. Rain from the day before yesterday—everything drips, the stones are slick. Toward the spring of the Abeuradors, which I once found frozen, with a small grove of box trees beside it, entirely claimed by moss. You should go there on a day of fog, when the landscape turns into pure confusion—and a sudden fright.

Deep green

Here the wild boar is lord, in the heart of forests where human presence has yet to tread. But we, on foot and by day, and the small creatures in hiding — we found the wallowing pond and the trees where they scratch themselves. Varied vegetation bursting into the greens of tender oaks, lining rough slate paths that trip you up. The rockroses will not let you forget them. The strawberry tree waits for its moment. The kermes oak, vigorous, lord of the undergrowth. Flowering heather — spring emerging. The forests of Can Buscarons, secrets of watchful eyes, beneath the ridge of the Vinyes Velles or Fanosa. And the mountain of God. And so it must be.

You must go

Head toward the forests of Can Planes, on the hill above the Roca del Vallès. You enter along the path that runs beside the irrigation channel for the vegetable gardens, beneath a cathedral of trees that follows the Mogent river, sheltered by the rock that supports the castle and gives the place its name. The channel was built in concrete in the eighties over the old medieval one, once made of earth and carrying water to the wheat mill pond—you can still see the mill in town.

Soon you come across a short stretch of the old High Road from Mataró. You cross the main road and continue along simple paths beneath a mix of trees: holm oaks bending in the wind, welcoming pine groves, the occasional oak, moss in the shaded patches, and the surprise of a few chestnut trees. There are also beautiful plants whose names we don't know, growing in the damp gullies that carry water when it rains, always ringed by heather and strawberry trees. It's a place for walking and looking, though you'll run into plenty of cyclists who've carved out trails for their vertiginous sport—something unsettling for those of us who move at a slower pace.

Pause for a moment: these forests are barely a hundred years old. In our grandparents' time, every inch of this land was covered in vineyards. The place called Mallols still remembers it—the vineyard of the Argent. What we see now, the holm oak woods and pine groves, is what came after abandonment. That's why the land is full of crumbling terraces swallowed by vegetation that has turned everything upside down. Dry-stone walls appear endlessly along the edges, or you find yourself straying off the path in search of the unknown.

I've mapped out a few corners that refuse to be forgotten, but others have given in and are no longer easy to find. Grasses hide them, and brambles have erased the memory of the farmers who once worked these plots. Since no one makes a living here anymore, the land has slipped into uselessness. Sometimes you reach uncertain stretches: crossroads that lead nowhere, paths that dissolve into thickets. It's part of the terrain anyone who ventures into these hills must contend with. Those who clear the land could bring order to it, but some things must be left to nature to reclaim.

To walk these forest paths is to love the trees, the harmony of colours and sounds, and the sudden appearance of traces left by earlier people. Every inch of this land has been worn down by those who passed through it: people from before writing, the iberians, those who brought latin, those who spread christianity, the farmers who lived under the lord of the castle. All of it beneath the hills of Turó Gros and Gall, and the rise of Ameia.

The record of antiquity begins with the dolmen of Can Planes and two stones—the Escorpí and the Foradada—so ancient that no one knows their true age. Then you move toward the area around Can Santpere, where the surrounding forests contain a bit of everything. You must stop at Turó Gros, which hides the true jewel of the area, brought back to light by people working the land with brush and patience: nearly two hectares of an iberian settlement, a remarkable spread of stones that once supported houses. During the war, soldiers from Mataró even set up machine-gun positions here.

A neighbour tells me that the Iberian remains used to be visible from La Roca, when the forest was clean and beautiful. People gathered firewood and sent it in large quantities to Granollers for bread ovens and tile kilns. Now

the holm oaks and undergrowth have swallowed everything, and the wood serves no purpose at all.

Following tangled tracks that you need to know in advance, you can reach the foundations and part of a lintel from Sant Pere del Bosc, a small fourteenth-century benedictine convent for nuns, abandoned centuries ago. There is also the lintel of a seventeenth-century hermitage in the garden of Can Nebot Gros—a mystery in itself.

The old farmhouses of those who worked this land still mark the territory: some reduced to rubble, like Can Ronses; others still holding out against time—Can Planes, Can Païssa, Can Santpere, Can Vilaret, Ca l'Argent. And Can Barangó, where an old farmer from the plain told me that the road to Òrrius once passed, that the boys would come on sundays to dance, and that he met his wife there.

Along these paths you also find scars in the mountainside left by the stonemasons who quarried materials for houses and roads. Some of these quarries are hard to spot, hidden by vegetation, with no path leading to the discarded cobblestones.

I walk without plan or order, because everything here is beautiful. Still, the north-facing slope above the Parpers road holds trails that are hard to resist. I love following the Can Company stream, which rises at the Mansa spring, among vivid greenery, birdsong, the sounds of unseen creatures keeping their distance, and shaded corners that brighten the walk.

You have to go.

The hollow’s water

An imposing grove of yellow mimosa in bloom, a few steps from the solemn pine, the gaze set toward Can Boquet, vineyards on the gentle slopes. I follow the wide path, through forest broken by the open mouths of forgotten mines, and a well. In the lower part of the hollow, well-fed trees and greening ferns. Mines swallowed by vegetation, doors with rusted iron bars, water spilling over. If you search the surroundings, you will find the remains left behind by so many springs. They were sought underground by the people who once walked these parts — now a cathedral of leaves — and the memory of a miller woman lingers. The distant sun, and birds telling their stories. And to the east, giant trees: pines and cork oaks.

Stones that moss does not yet know

This is how the hermitages must once have shone, fresh from the mason's hands, when they were handed over to the parish priest in the year one thousand. Rain has worn them down since, and the dissolving wind has done its work. They gleam in their Romanesque stillness, hidden in northern valleys where the cold settles and winter brings snow. Now they are sacred stones, met by eyes that look on them with reverence.

I am drawn to the hermitages that are no longer there—heaps of rubble, abandoned, without devotees. No one goes near them; not even the saints remember them when they work their miracles. And yet at Aiguamoix there is a new one, its stones tightly set, its moss not yet aware of itself. Simply, time has not yet had time.

There is something unsettling in these finishes from the day before yesterday—something foreign, distant, almost ornamental. It takes decades of patina to build spiritual tension, and it is at Cabanyes that I will commend myself against the enemies of the devil. But go to Santa Maria d'Aiguamoix, in the hills of Alella—and bring with you the soaring fancy of the governor's architect, who also belongs to another world.

Through remembered land

Expect a rough passage between villages: a descent that draws you toward the Mesa river; dry-stone walls collapsing; the memory of vanished lagoons; a lone cleric in this barren expanse; an open plateau; a distant, black-and-white vision of the road once crossed by kings—misshapen, neglected, strewn with flint; the edge of clouds; and an arrogant muleteer with a steady gaze.

Forty kilometres across land that remembers agrarian boldness and unchanging centuries: laboratores, oratores; the repeated labour of those who paid tribute—tithes, first fruits, levies—funding distant wars, tending the livestock that was life itself: sheep, oxen, cows, calves; the wool of merino flocks migrating each winter from the cold; drove roads, green pastures; disputes between shepherds settled in distant courts by those who never set foot among the lambing folds.

I follow writings that map the geography of wheat, rye, barley, and oats—crops on slopes and in hollows, on broken, stony ground; forests of juniper and holm oak, where gorse, thyme, Christ's thorn, and cistus—sparse growth—endure a harsh, exacting climate. The land of Molina, the sexma del Campo, the ravaged churchyard of Navafría; of celtiberians once settled on these flat horizons where I now walk, in this quiet dusk, centuries after the hunting king.

Along the river Ges

We are already in Vidrà, a place known far and wide for the Fonda Serrassolsas, where, under the precise direction of Mr Pere, you can sit down to a supper of boiled potatoes unlike any you have tasted before. Nothing is missing from the virtues of traditional cooking here—the croquettes, for instance, a frankly toxic affair in most restaurants, speak here of pure glory. Then there are the battered potatoes, which draw people from far away. Mr Pere, a man of age and long experience, son of the legendary cook Primitiva—who gave the house its reason for being—runs the place and, with quiet authority, recommends whatever comes out of those kitchens. He speaks of what is needed and what suits the moment, but I hold my ground on the boiled potatoes.

After a gentle day wandering through unmapped corners of the area—dodging fallen trees and puddles, heading toward the castle of Milany, caught in shadow and hidden by the Clarella stream, standing in disbelief before the Mir waterfall, the Martingala spring, the peak of Quer—we settled in for the night beneath the great oak at the Creu d'Arç, where this old family keeps house. And after tasting them, I will say it again: the potatoes, dressed simply with oil.

The next morning we drove toward the Sant Bartomeu stream, along a track meant to take us to the hermitage of that saint, at the place called Covildases. Before long we pulled the car off to one side, careful not to obstruct the nonexistent traffic, and, once we had laced up whatever might keep our feet intact, we set off toward the Molí Nou, a ruined medieval mill now swallowed by the moss of two small streams.

We had barely been walking ten minutes before we had to take our boots straight back off to cross a lively stream rushing down without ceremony. We nearly left our feet behind—the cold of that hidden water, fresh from the mountains, cut like a knife. The path made amends: the damp had restored colour to the beech leaves that winter had stripped away, and a light mist softened the outlines of trees and rock.

After months of relentless rain, the forests seem almost aggressive, drawn tight with pride—as if they know we are watching and want to be the main characters. Their pointed branches scratch at us, spilling over the paths, as if to remind us they are here, that nature is owed its due.

All this water—and more. So much that in romanesque times a stone bridge was built to make the place passable, linking the two banks of this river, which will soon be called the Ges, though it does not yet bear that name here. This is the bridge of Salgueda, hidden within a riverside forest that in spring conceals it completely. At a crossroads, a path drops away to the right—we leave it for the return, since we will have to climb it then—and continue upward.

Let us take stock. We are on the shaded side of the Curull range, under the canopy of a beech forest, with several kilometres of pure aesthetic pleasure ahead. The vast forms of the trees, the dense darkness that admits no light, streams spilling down from the ridge, a bird calling, the rocks we must pick our way across, a sudden sound that makes you turn—and always the box shrubs. This is a temple of peace; the soul gathers itself and walks through it. Be quiet, say nothing, go slowly: the path will end, and you will never walk it again in innocence.

And then, suddenly, light—the view opens over the valley of the river Ges. Ahead, on the ridge of the Cristians Vells, stands the sanctuary of Bellmunt, and off to one side, our

destination: the Forat Micó. First we step across the modest thread of the Salgueda stream, and a short climb brings us to the farmstead of Espaulella, so old that it appears in a document from the year 1100. Closer at hand, an inscription on an outbuilding reads: *Esta obra ha feta fer Catarina Aspaulella any 1678*. The place, set among meadows and terraced fields that seem to ache for a human hand, is a pleasure in itself—beneath a sun that shows itself only sparingly, under the height of a great cliff.

We descend along narrow paths until we reach the Ferrers track, which runs beneath the sheer wall of the Socarrada cliffs, and now we are fully inside the Forat Micó. The river Ges is formed from the streams of Sant Bartomeu, Salgueda, Bac del Coll, and the waters that drain from the Curull range. All of it, gathered from the Vidranès basin, flows down toward the plain of Vic, joining the river Ter at Torelló. This passage exists thanks to the Forat Micó, a geological accident: a narrow gorge carved over thousands of years between the Bellmunt range to the west and the Curull range to the east. It would be more striking still had a track not been cut through to give access from the south. In earlier times, the path we follow linked the plain of Vic with Vidrà—a kind of minor High Road, with the bridge of Salgueda as its key point.

After the descent we reach the farm of Rabassola, where we must cross the river again, spread wide here over fine cobblestones. Once more we take off our boots and make our way across with something like a tightrope walker's balance. Turning north, we follow the track along the right bank of the Ges as it climbs gently. There are fine views of pools and bends softening this remote corner of the world, watched over since ancient times by the farmhouse that still keeps the valley alive.

Not long after sharing the path with a few placid cows, we leave the track—and here we must pay attention, since a newer path could easily lead us astray. Ours is old and narrow, strewn with stones, heading toward Degollats, where the remains of a farmhouse stand at the end of a dark path, and where the magnificent Tosca—a limestone formation—seeps water whenever it has rained.

We continue to a well-marked junction that leads us to the extraordinary waterfall at the mill of the Salt. In these rain-blessed months, the sight defies description: a white curtain that sprays you as you pass, stones shining in every shade of green, branches, softer trees, and the sound—a sound that soaks into everything. Alone, with no one else around, we take it in fully, on a day that is not even a sunday.

Climbing again, to the right lie the nameless remains of the mill that sustained this place for centuries, and a little further on, the junction mentioned earlier. It is time to turn back. We cross the bridge of Salgueda again, and once more take off our boots. In summer, though, the stream will likely run more gently, and your boots may remain undisturbed.

And so to sleep at Can Serrassolsas, uneasy at the thought that on such a night the potatoes might be missing, replaced perhaps by sad green beans or round yellow chickpeas. Our hearts tightened as Mr Pere began to recite the menu—until it became clear that, yes, there would be boiled potatoes, and would we like some. What a moment.

Where the ruin is due

Can Cabanyes, up on the hill, with views toward wherever you care to look. They say someone was already writing about the place in the eleventh century, and that its owners had the chapel of Sant Bartomeu built — for the needs of the soul — beside the path that crossed the mountains. But one day these people became lords and descended to the plain, a musket shot from Argentona, where a magnificent manor house still recalls that they were somebody. And the old house, where generations had worked, slowly came undone. I wanted to see what remained of the ancient homestead. I had tried more than once, but there was no penetrating the tangle of thorn and stubborn undergrowth, and only the well kept alive the memory of those medieval neighbours. Now, with this craze for clearing forests and leaving them bare and gleaming, the turn has come to this ridge, and we can approach closely enough to form an idea of the house that once stood here. A great building, Can Cabanyes — you trace fragments of wall, the odd one rising three hand-spans, rooms you must imagine. Stones slipping loose from their places, and a rounded wall that perhaps once held up the threshing floor.

Go now, for nature will soon take it back again.

Up to Guanta

At the castle of Sentmenat, dating back to medieval times, the lords of the house held such power that they could judge their neighbours in both civil and criminal matters. The tenant farmers must have climbed up there hat in hand. Directly opposite stands the hermitage of Sant Jaume, where the lords are buried—so when the time came for that final journey, it was only a few steps away. Convenient.

Further on we pass the eighteenth-century farmhouse of Can Fruitós, whose owners seem to have everything: the forest of Can Fruitós, the stream of Can Fruitós, the pond of Can Fruitós, the mountain of Can Fruitós, and even the thousand-year-old hermitage of Can Fruitós. There are fields, paths, woodland—and after greeting a nativity scene set beside the track, we cross the Aigua Senosa stream, running cheerfully downhill. Higher up, by a bridge, we come across the rustic altar raised to the Virgin of Can Senosa, deeply venerated, standing among the stones and listening to the water ring out.

There is the path we need to follow: red earth, churned into mud by the rain. Climbing steadily, we reach the spring of Bou, water with a certain gravity to it, and a wooden plank lets us hop across the lively gully. Just beyond it, the waterfall of Guanta appears. Words do not do it justice; photographs conceal more than they reveal—you have to go, to encounter it properly, to give yourself over to it, even to spend a night beneath its overwhelming height. A warning, though: it is famous, but only truly flows after heavy rain, because the gully simply cannot sustain more.

Behind it, scrambling upward, we reach the Cova del Comte, so often spoken of, clinging to the rock face. This is where Count Borrell took refuge while fleeing Almanzor

after the battle of Matabous, near Montcada. One imagines he was not entirely uncomfortable there—hunting wild boar, bathing in the pools, listening to the birds with his wife, the delicate Ermengarda of Auvergne, at his side. Meanwhile Almanzor was laying waste to Barcelona, and those early catalans who did not die there were taken off as slaves to warmer lands.

We head now for the house of Guanta, cross the stream, and come upon the remains of a lime kiln. From here begins a dizzying climb—we have taken the well-known Malet–Costa route, one way of reaching the house, and not the easiest. Stretch out a leg, grab hold of a holm oak; a stone shifts underfoot, a branch lashes out. The slope is steep enough to unsettle you, and who knows what comes next. When you finally reach the top, you find yourself behind the house: fenced vegetable plots, dog kennels—it does not look especially promising. In the end it all works out, and we are grateful to the people who live there for taking in stride the peculiar arrival of two mushroom foragers at their door. The dogs, too, are brought to calm by the lady of the house.

We have arrived at the house of Guanta, so old it was already in use in the fourteenth century, hanging over the drop. A beautiful setting, wide views, sunday lunch served at the restaurant. We make short work of some breaded lamb chops. Then on along the track until we branch left onto a fine path leading to the spring of Nueretes, which runs steadily at all hours, without fuss.

Now begins a particularly beautiful stretch along a narrow path that skirts the Guanta stream, full these days. Slippery stones, more red earth, small pools, green ferns, the sound of little waterfalls—a hidden corner of real charm in these mountains.

A sign warns that if we want to see the Falsa spring—the "false" spring—we should watch our footing, as there is a

risk of falling. And since there is a risk, off we go to take it. The spring itself is a disappointment, false in the sense that it is not really a spring at all. Better not to be fooled—walk straight past. We continue along a dull, wide, nameless track until we come across a small marvel of the kind that can lie in plain sight: right beside the path, a striking little anticline, a folded pleat of rock, like an accordion compressed by geological force.

Faced with that kind of power, we move on quietly. And then, suddenly, a sort of structure aspiring to be a weekend house, with a Saint George on the façade—that figure whom art, history, and legend have embroidered into a hero.

After a few hundred more metres along the track, we leave it behind and step onto the more fitting ground of holm oaks and pines. Soon we reach a lookout over the Aiguasenosa valley—a place with a remarkable view. We eat, we look, we move on. Down along a wooded path of tall pines reaching for the light, and among the tangled vegetation, plenty of dry-stone terraces, forgotten vineyards, and the remains of labour being reclaimed by the forest. At last we are down; we pass Can Senosa, a welcoming farmhouse—and we commend ourselves to the Virgin.

Shadows

In this corner, a half-ruined house,
a ruin inhabited by a tree.
A village of a single street,
silence under the height of San Juan:
fields, drove road, path.
The geology asserts itself.
In the ochres of dusk,
of my own dusk,
I will live inside other people's walls
on this journey into memory.
Countryside that offers up the austere,
an intruder in a landscape
far from my green,
from first memories,
where, I am told,
someone once put an end to someone's life
on a day long since set aside,
and the grievance still moves through the place.
In this withdrawn world, full of days,
I attend to the stories
of affable, long-lived people,
who insist on the shadows of their own time.
Facing the window,
I write of then.

Dry trees

I made my way to the old rectory, drawn by an image that revealed the place to me—something unmistakably medieval about it. But I approached from the back, winding through the hills, because this was once a parish of houses hidden in the forest, before some of the neighbours moved closer to the High Road to settle there. More houses, a wall, and a church beside it, since the one at Pertegàs was too far away—they would call it Sant Celdoni.

It is best to cross by the bridge at Pallerola, over the stream that takes its name from the parish, then climb toward the Sellers range along a path kept narrow by watchful grasses, a path for the few. From there, a forestry track rises; a glance at Can Minuart, a house well kept by its people; then around Puig Morell, at the height of Can Fèlix Vell, to begin the return, turning right in front of Can Filòsof. I go in search of the cave of Sant Guillem, whose hermitage can be seen from afar. In this hollow beneath a great rock, prehistoric people may well have spent time—cramped, perhaps, but shelter nonetheless.

I follow a path half swallowed by growth, one that seems to belong to me alone. The grasses do not welcome disturbance, and the thorned ones make that clear. Through the woods of the Clots, brushing against the damp branches of the gully that bears the saint's name. We press on along paths and through woodland that someone has cleared—and I do not like it, because once a forest is flattened it begins to resemble the moon: dry trees everywhere.

Around here lie the remains of the friars' kiln; paths beneath towering woodland and dry streambeds that autumn brings back to life; the formidable pine of Villena, shaped like a mushroom, its trunk crowned by a roof of

branches. More woodland tangled with the mess left by those who cut and do not clear, paths that never see the sun—fortunate, perhaps, in summer. This is the shaded slope of the mountain of Can Tomàs, and we descend with the terraces of vanished vineyards in view, along the path of Santa Mònica and down to the Pertegàs stream, which we follow all the way to Sant Martí.

Here history bears down on you, before this small church that has watched over christians almost since the days when Rome's lions still devoured them. And the rectory, from feudal times—a stately building, fit for a well-appointed priest. I have come more than once to sit before these walls, in quiet contemplation. I would suggest visiting on a day of low cloud and uncertain sky, better still after rain, when everything draws you closer to the medieval scene you are trying to imagine. And be sure to greet our friend Pepus, who looks after the place and tells stories that reach back a thousand years.

In the land of two rivers

To wander the outskirts of Can Ribot and come upon the farmhouse that appears in all the old records, its roof half collapsed, the sundial still marking time. To push through thick woodland and find the mine and the washpool. And the source of Àlbers d'en Javà—a hidden, untamed corner, dense with trees fed by the stream, where the water never stops.

Then on toward the sunny slope of the Espinal: first the spring of the Llorer, where mosquitoes give me no peace. A great tree shades the ruined farmhouse that lends the place its name, and in a century-old photograph you can still see it alive, its threshing floor facing east.

I walk slowly across the gentle plain, still worked here and there by the occasional farmer, beloved of birds. I stop to count the shades of green, calmed by the soft undulation of ground trodden by so many over the years—this was once the old road from distant Barcelona to the Montnegre. It was here, stretched out in the grass, that three thousand french soldiers camped for a few days on their way to make war on the people of Mataró.

And now toward Can Misser Prats, beneath the cliff of Febrer, a forgotten farmhouse falling into ruin. For all its history, it is hard to see its ribs laid bare to sun and wind and rain—the stone arches, the useless press nearing the end; and by the time I returned, it had become little more than a rotting heap of timber.

I head uphill, crossing more lost history: through the young vineyards of Can Pins and down the slopes of Terrades, once a bright expanse of vines, now overtaken by paths and woodland. Today I run into a hunter after partridge, who explains the finer points of his craft. I leave

the beaten track and climb straight toward the Pla d'en Dama, clawing at the earth, hauling myself up through scrub-covered terraces, catching on oak branches, drawing blood—until at last I find the clean line of the ridge path.

The sight of Dosrius in the valley below is a relief. The sun is out, and everything fills with a life that fog and cloud had hidden on a day of uncertain weather. The shaded slope beneath the hill of Can Ribot, the old Vinyes Velles, and the plain we crossed have all turned into a world of vegetation that has swallowed every path; nothing remains of what the unreliable maps promise. I once tried to force my way through the undergrowth in search of an obscure spring—the Avellaners—said to rise where the Sot de l'Ase begins. If you find it, you will have been lucky.

I wrote that some time ago, and it is no longer true. Now cyclists have cleared many of the old paths along this hillside, and opened new ones besides. They have made a beautiful stretch of country accessible to anyone who loves wild places, and I never tire of returning. I have found a magical, untouched path beneath enormous trees, past long-forgotten sulphur-spray wells, which I will leave undisclosed for those who come in search of quiet.

There is one sheltered place worth recommending: the Torrent de Cal Rajoler. Make your way to the source of the Sot, long buried and now restored, where the memory of the eight-year-old I once was recalls roma girls throwing stones at snakes. There is water I will never cross again, as the saying goes; but you should follow the stream and take in the vegetation along its banks. There are small falls that draw the birds, a tiny green-tinted pool, and poplars now bare, with the cold arrived and snow already fallen. Walk on until the thorns refuse you passage. Pure sensation.

Rough tracks

Time to head back to Céllecs, that encyclopedia of nature and woodland restlessness. We set out in the Ruscalleda forest and follow a track until we come upon an overgrown, damp path below the ruin of Can França. It has rained in recent days, and everything is soaked along the climbing trail that crosses the Puigdellunes range—a long stretch thick with strawberry-tree berries and pine needles. This is also an old pilgrim road, once taken by people from the Maresme on their way to the shrine of Santa Quitèria, famed for its miracles. We reach the caves of Can Nadal—a surprise in this hidden corner of the Vallès hills.

We drop into the damp hollow of the Torrent de Can Pei, my secret place: wild country, large trees, a mix of vegetation—oaks and pines, and the occasional stray chestnut. Back on the track, we take the path toward the ruin of Can Monpart, but before reaching it we turn onto the track that climbs to the top of Céllecs. From there, a narrow, vegetation-rich trail invites a pause, before leading us back to the track. We follow it for about a kilometre, until a path branches off to the right—though without a map, this would be hard to follow.

That path is worth taking. It is beautiful, and more passable now than it was a few years ago. Someone has cleared the most difficult sections, and since it runs below the rocks of the Contravent, it may well be climbers who have kept it open. Still, there comes a point where the path simply fades, and we have to push upward, scrambling through an open pine forest, easy enough going, until we reach a well-maintained trail not far from the Gorg Negre. There are more paths beyond, but that is where we leave it for today.

The shadows of Riudemeia

Here the people of Òrrius hold sway—a village tucked into the folds of the hills. Four houses and a church, born a thousand years ago, perhaps because this place lay along a route. Houses and roads grow together when feet are the only way of getting anywhere—the two feet of men, the four feet of mules.

It is a sunday afternoon and I walk through empty streets. Òrrius is, in truth, a village of a single street—the Carrer Major—lined with small white houses and shops stubborn enough to remain open. Some houses show a touch of flair; one, with rendered columns, invites a closer look. Along the olive-lined path, the place still carries the air of somewhere people once came to take the waters and restore their health—myself among them, as a boy. A church square paved by stonemasons with thousands of coloured stones. A corner building catches my eye, wearing its modernista ambitions openly, as if some master builder, returned from the capital, had brought back ideas ahead of their time—you see it in the rounded edges, the ornament, the rear wall that closes it off.

And then a house of substance, in reddish tones—a medieval structure enlarged in the seventeenth century by the Cunill family, prosperous in their day. I have eaten rice at a local place and I am satisfied: they got it right. Beside me, an old timber merchant, once a buyer and seller of trees, speaks of forests and vineyards, of roads he opened, of deals struck far from home—and of how it has all been lost. I look at photographs a hundred years old and see hills thick with vines, the sunny face of Céllecs heavy with grapes, a cart entering the village. Everything here still smells faintly

of wine: the place of the white vine, the place of the Sant vine, the farmhouse of Can Vinyamata.

We set out in search of an old path descending from the ridge, from Cal Camat to Òrrius. It can still be walked, and you can still say a Paternoster at the stone cross that commemorates Josep Font, struck dead by lightning. The stretch from Òrrius to Parpers appears in the land registry as the road of Can Vinyamata, or of Parpers. It leaves Òrrius heading north, crosses the modern road, and drops to the stream of Can Planes beside the farmhouse of the same name. It passes the stream and house of Can Deri, then climbs on to Cal Gravat and the large farmhouse of Can Vinyamata. Soon we reach the track that now serves the quarry, laid over the old road toward Parpers. Much of the route remains in good condition, still used to reach scattered properties and largely faithful to its original line. A short stretch before Can Deri is impassable, swallowed by vegetation, but it is there, waiting to be recovered. The final section, below the track, has been badly damaged by earthworks, and beyond that it disappears entirely until near the Parpers pass, where a few metres of the old descent survive.

And there is another road—two, in fact. Both once major routes through the Parpers pass, linking the Vallès with the Maresme. One is truly ancient, the path of walkers and mule trains crossing back and forth between inland and coast—the road of muleteers and bandits. The ascent from Argentona still preserves traces, though altered; the descent toward La Roca remains intact. The other was begun in the late eighteenth century for carts, to carry timber from the Montseny down to the shipyards of Mataró. Parts of that work still survive above the bed of the Gallega: retaining walls, drainage channels, and a fine bridge worth seeing.

Along the upper ridge of the Ameia range runs an important footpath linking France to Madrid across Catalonia. Below it, a quarry threatens to swallow the route entirely, a large-scale operation that has already supplied vast quantities of stone, including for the harbour of Mataró.

These wooded hills are watched over by the Ameia stream, sustained by whatever water the surrounding mountains can spare. On the Òrrius side you can follow it for a time beneath cathedral-like riverside vegetation, but it soon slips from view, and trying to trace it further costs half your strength, forcing your way through paths long reclaimed by undergrowth. It runs through Can Riudemeia, where in medieval times its generous flow powered two flour mills—now reduced to memory in the remaining stones, one of them the hidden mill of Rubiol.

Now it is time to climb toward the hill of Aquença, pausing first to remember the people of Can Querol, the vanished farmhouse that once watched over the village's main road. We climb along a chain of pleasant, easy paths—easy enough for grandparents and children, who can enjoy them without risk. Sandwiches, a potato omelette, an apple. We walk contentedly along narrow tracks ablaze with colour at this time of year, paths the people of Òrrius have always used to stretch their legs. We walk on, and keep walking, with a quiet sense of gratitude.

And then, all at once—desolation. You leave the shade of the holm oaks and step into something like a wasteland. The ground scraped bare. Everything destroyed, nothing left standing. I cannot help but grieve: there were trees here that were friends of mine—old trees I knew, squirrels among them. It is as if a conquering army had passed through and left ruin behind. Unbearable—the vanished woodland, where once there were good paths beneath living branches, and a moss-covered stone where I used to rest. All gone.

We retreat downhill, cross the stream, and pass beneath the Ameia range—a place that has also suffered from felling, yet still holds enough beauty for us, servants of Artemis, to take some pleasure in it. There is a path here worth seeking out—overgrown, beautiful, winding its way to the romantic ruins of Can Roviró. All ruins are romantic, after all: the order of nature broken, its final defeat.

A little higher up lies the little-known Teulada de Pedra, which I am glad to point out—a curious rock formation resembling a natural shelter, perhaps a gift from the goddess I mentioned earlier. And what of the ravine of the Vinyes, a lonely place known only to wild boar? Where there is now forest and scrub, people once laboured hard. It is worth following the half-forgotten paths that lead nowhere, beneath the road to Sant Bartomeu, above Can Planes. There is a cluster of large rocks forming a striking scene, marked on old maps as the Rocar. And if you can, push on to the wild ravine of Can Planes, where everything is green and the light seems to come from far away—a small jungle.

Fifteen years have passed, and I have returned to this land of Riudemeia, holm oaks flecked with pines. Undergrowth now hides the old vine terraces, long ago destroyed by a blight from the north that drove farmers down to the plain to make a living from potatoes. This is a land where the pink and white flowers of rockrose spill into every clearing the forest leaves open to the sun. Here I have seen the everlasting flower—a bloom of the graveyard with an almost oriental scent—and cliffs half veiled in moss and trees: holm oak and pine, thyme and rosemary.

Our steps carry us through the fragrant stretch of Can Carreras—the old name of the farmhouse demolished to build the Rancho Grande, a postwar name born of hardship and thrift, now called Bell Recó. Towering eucalyptus, the

faint scent of elderflower, and then the dry bed of the Pins stream.

Through this country once passed mule trains loaded with timber from the Montseny, bound for the shipyards of Mataró. Everyone knows the so-called "Roman road," which is not roman at all—begun in the late eighteenth century and left unfinished when funds ran out. But today we have walked the true road, the one people actually used for centuries,rRomans and christians alike. Past the dry, overgrown bed of the Gallega—stones, trees, shade, not a drop of water—we turned left and climbed in long zigzags that the mules must once have appreciated. Reaching the pass of Can Roviró, we continued to another—the pass of Parpers—the old, immemorial route. And at the top, a ridge of stone, whether shaped by nature or by human hands, that catches the walker by surprise.

Now we follow a path laid out along old, solitary vine terraces—now planted with all kinds of things—which cyclists have carefully cleared for their sunday outings. Good work: it opens up a beautiful stretch of woodland, welcome shade in the heat, full of the memory of those who once laboured here. You would never guess it now, with the trees concealing everything, but these terraces once turned the mountainside into a vast staircase, carved stone by stone by people with everything at stake. Gentle slopes in places—but also terraces clinging to near-vertical ground, ravines fit only for acrobats. Charcoal platforms and forgotten springs.

Below Can Vinyamata, a thicket of thin poles—cut trees resprouting, waiting to be cut again. A long walk unfolds beneath the green of this spring's leaves, alternating shade and sun. The ruins of Can Roviró, swallowed by branches, stand beside a spreading stand of mimosa. An overgrown path runs beneath hazel trees, and a few steps later the scent of eucalyptus returns.

But looking more closely, something has changed in recent years. On the shaded slope of the Ginesteres—once stripped bare, branches scattered, paths opened by machines—the vegetation has returned, the forest has recovered… waiting, perhaps, to be cut down again.

Time of miners, now memory

This land of Vall-llosera — wild, gnawed at in the search for treasure. A fever once took hold, and people set to work with pick and shovel, turning over stones, hunting for veins of solid mineral. Iron, lead, copper — such was the hope that burrowed beneath these ridges in the middle of the nineteenth century. Imaginative, these explorers: they gave their mines the names of their ladies — Amparito, Aurora, Enriqueta, Antònia, Carolina, Rosa, Victòria. And others besides: the Spring, the Pearl, the Provident, the Deluge, the Coincidence, the Voracious. Mines in the country of Montcada; fluorite at Montornès; galena beneath the Pollo. What remains are holes and ironwork, concrete shells tangled among branches and trees. All of it picked over by mineral collectors. And by the curious — like myself.

A medieval corner

We arrive at Vilanova del Vallès and cross the river by the bridge built by a man from Mataró, who made life easier for the people — a boon to farmers and traders alike. Bramasacs: a mill of solid antiquity, already mentioned in a parchment of 1152, and the neighbouring farmhouse — sacred stones left to fend for themselves by the hand of Our Lord.

The place deserves its due: a thousand-year-old chronicle in stone. The High Road once passed through here, the *camino regio per quem itur a villa Granullariorum ad Maritimam* — that is, from Granollers down to the coast. You will find it between the mill and the house, and on the other side of the road, until a few weeks ago, there still remained a stretch of earth and trees, now surrendered to the march of concrete. I have been there at sunset, its yellows bewildering, touching the pool thick with vegetation, trying to forget the noise and the iron railings. To see again the sacks of flour and the carter — great-great-grandfather of my great-great-grandfather — passing along this path. The wind, a few clouds, on the hill of God.

A sad day in the ordered forest

t rains, and now and then the sun comes out, and I walk through an open stretch of sky and earth and the green of wide fields. From Sils—a place of scattered settlement since ancient times, gathered along the High Road. A hamlet of four houses, more or less, beside Santa Maria, and beyond it the inn of the Mallorquines. Everything has changed, and yet here I am on foot, crossing the plain of Massabé, where some farmhouses still stand and others are shuttered, turned into warehouses of memory and scrap iron.

Reaching Can Brun, a path leads to the road, and we approach the gentle hill of Puigsardina. Above it stand the towers, visible from afar, like sentries watching over the green meadows. We head straight for them, though the paths do not quite lead there—pushing through branches and undergrowth, step by step, the rain turning the ground to mud and leaving the vegetation dripping.

Magnificent, the towers of the optical telegraph—and here there are two, whereas at Murrià there was only one, and the same at Montolivet. That calls for an explanation. The optical telegraph served both military and civilian purposes, and on some lines two separate networks were built. Public money, it seems, was no object—a bottomless pit. The towers still stand firm, their walls holding against the weather: hollow inside, but thick, good for a few more decades yet. Below runs the stone ditch that makes them hard to approach and keeps them safe—once from the fury of the carlists, now from simple neglect.

We stop to look at the grand, useless old mill of Arrupit, a handsome building just a few steps from the famous inn. Railway works block our way, though they leave the occasional gap—for the hares. The inn of Arrupit is worth a

visit: the High Road from Madrid to France once passed through here. A replica milestone gives the distance still to Barcelona—sixteen leagues—and to France—twenty-one. In this building, now a private house, still standing and holding on to something of its old character, on a windy day in 1538, an unknown traveller knocked at the door. He turned out to be a king—the First of Spain and the Fifth of Germany, Charles by name. The innkeepers did not recognise him, and since he spoke in german, the whole affair dissolved into confusion.

Thinking of the old stories of bandits who once made their living here—and of the honest people who, by force, kept them fed—we pass through one of those geometrically perfect poplar groves so common in La Selva, where the trees seem to grow under orders from a lieutenant colonel. Then a stone bridge, known as the Devil's. Why the devil holds jurisdiction over so many bridges in Catalonia is never quite explained.

Magnificent too, the eighteenth-century irrigation channel—we are following water now. We head toward the lake along a long, peaceful stretch. The sun returns, and the plain, full of light and colour, looks almost edible.

Meadows, pools, hidden corners, streams, stepping stones—the lake of Sils, a faint trace of what was once an enormous body of water, seven square kilometres that for centuries swallowed the surrounding land. On old maps, this inland sea of Catalonia dwarfs Banyoles, which looks like a child's puddle beside it. All that ended in 1851, when the waters were drained. The reclaimed land was divided among those who built the irrigation channel, and over time the basin filled with hay meadows where herds grazed. That changed again toward the end of the twentieth century, when trees were planted for timber, and now rows of vertical trunks keep time like a marching regiment.

And yet today I am content. Soaked through, I have seen and heard every kind of small bird: grasshopper warbler, little tern, mallard, mandarin duck, pintail, grey heron, spotted crake, little egret, common sandpiper, ruff, nightjar, kingfisher, green woodpecker, bee-eater, nightingale, melodious warbler, great reed warbler, reed warbler, blackcap, goldcrest, treecreeper, golden oriole, woodpigeon, moorhen, great crested grebe, flycatcher, jay, magpie, carrion crow, greenfinch, chaffinch, serin, goldfinch, reed bunting, wren, and the tits—enough birdsong to die happily listening to. The best of all possible worlds, if it were not for the mosquitoes, the marsh's special forces, intent on colonising my dried-out skull.

From the lookout you can see the groves of plane trees and poplars; the floodplain forest of ash and willow; the lagoon; the irrigation channel with its remains of reed beds, dense stands of cane and bramble; the wet grasslands thick with sedge; the hay meadows dotted with ash trees; the oak groves tangled in undergrowth; and the Mediterranean scrub on the hills—cork oaks, pines, heather, rockrose, patches of dry grassland. So the sign tells us.

Let us set the words aside and simply look, without adjectives. Perhaps silence—the kind certain monastic orders recommend—would bring us closer to the surrender required to truly see. And the last glance should go to the white church of Santa Maria—nothing remarkable, but pleasant enough—beside the four houses that have clung to the french road for so long.

And then, off to lunch.

Woods of Clarà

Above the Clarà stream, in the lands of Argentona, on the shaded slope of the hill of Dalipà and the Pujolar, there is a wide hillside once covered, top to bottom, in vines. You can still trace the terraces now claimed by handsome pine groves, and find the remains of all that hard work: a ruined sulphur tank here, a broken cistern there, a wild vine that refuses to disappear. Or the hollow where Grau kept his vineyard hut, which he rented, and where he found water. And all the paths that once led to work, weaving a tangled web of directions now lost in the brambles.

There are plenty of springs here to quench your thirst, when they run, and a fair number of people from Argentona who care for them have kept them in good shape, dressing them with care. They all draw from the torrent of Manreset, which gathers the waters of the Dalipà hill and seems to run like a powerful underground vein. Along its course you find the spring of the Hazels, the spring of the Oak, the spring of Cabot's Chestnuts, and the spring of Quico, where you can spend a long while beneath the plane trees that keep it company. The spring of the Chestnut Tree almost certainly shares the same source.

The spring of the Gavatx is something else entirely. Tucked into a narrow, vegetation-choked gully, it is the one I love most—perhaps for the mystery it breathes, and for the autumn, thick with scorched leaves. To reach it, you follow the channel carved by millennia of rain, beneath damp walls coated in green. Halfway up, turn left, and after a few stumbles you come out into the open.

A web of paths—so many you can lose yourself. One of them, long and beautiful, leads straight to the lookout above the valley of Argentona. A place you cannot miss, above two

old quarries once worked for cobblestones. Ringed by pine groves and sturdy old oaks, this is the rock of Serra. From here you look out over the stream, the hills of Traià and Argentona, and the sea, shining silver today. Below lie the remains of the old road from Argentona to Òrrius, running from Sant Sebastià down to the Riera and back up through Can Caramany. Higher still, the path of the Mal Pas, once a gateway to the plateau of the Matxos—greet the fine rock of Quim del Virat as you pass—and below the hill of Matacabres, toward the crossroads at the pass of the Port, and toward Cal Camat Vell, where it all comes together.

Here, in the middle of the valley, stands the early romanesque church of Sant Pere de Clarà, built by a ninth-century priest named Baio. It was once the chapel of a benedictine priory that stood beside it, later replaced in the seventeenth century by the farmhouse of Can Marc. And the Clarà stream—often dry, but cheerful when the rains come. Water is the key here: years ago its carbonated, bicarbonate, and iron-rich properties were discovered, once famed as a cure for everything. Not so long ago it was still sold bottled under the name Aigua de Clarà, drawn from a spring open to anyone.

Coming down the path from the pass of Gironella toward Clarà, you enter a wood of holm oaks and oaks. A canopy of branches and leaves shuts out the light and the summer heat. The ground is worn by rain, rotted in places, and you have to watch your footing carefully—everything is crumbling sand that slips underfoot.

Down through the switchbacks, along a path that must once have been important—there are stretches carefully reinforced with dry stone—you can feel that many people, many people, once came this way. A mysterious house, and a whole anthology of trees: ancient holm oaks, pines, four kinds of oak. We are in the heart of the april scrubland,

thick with rare, almost improbable plants, like *Arisarum vulgare subsp. simorrhinum*, the friar's cowl. Look for it—it is rare, and beautiful.

I have walked through extraordinary gullies here, dense with tangled green. Through the old vineyard of the Truc, now turned to woodland. I have also spent time around the historic farmhouse of Can Blanc, its stream and its spring—a place where, in my youth, I passed days with the mountain boys. Once, beside the house, a group of us from the Isards made a proper rice dish: we brought fish, meat, onion, rice, and a real paella pan. Light the fire, and eat. Nearby, I was surprised to find the remains of two old brick kilns, right in the middle of the woods. There is everything here, if you know how to look.

And there is adventure too. A path as wild as jungle: dense vegetation, narrow, under towering trees, cut by gullies, full of obstacles. An old path that lost its purpose long ago, and that no one uses anymore. I went anyway—to try it. Thick clothes against the thorns, glasses for the branches, gloves, a small pack, a cap, and a tool to force my way through if needed.

We begin beside a huge tank. The first stretch is flat, and the few branches in the way bend easily—heather, with its gentle touch. Straight ahead, making good progress, until a junction: up would take us to Can Blanc, but we are heading for hell, which, as everyone knows, lies below. So we turn right and begin to descend. Soon it becomes clear that this path has character, because getting through it becomes a story in itself, and little by little it closes in. You have to jump, crouch, scratch yourself raw, groan, take another step, and another, and keep going—there is no turning back. I notice now that I write we begin, we go, we see… and yet I was alone the whole time.

I should say that on the day I found this small, primordial paradise, in the middle of autumn, it was raining. A steady, measured rain that soaked everything through. Nature burst into colour—intense greens, water running everywhere, autumn leaves of plane trees and oaks, the cry of birds. The path, worn thin by years of rain gnawing at it, the earth reddish and stony; every step watched, my feet by now accustomed to slipping, working to hold their ground.

There is no going back, but at times the original path is simply gone—following it would mean cutting through too much—and that is when you notice that some other devotee of these pleasures has already opened an alternative way, left or right. You push through as best you can until you find the path again, which must lead somewhere, because you do not know where it ends. And the rain, relentless.

I keep going, trousers soaked, heavy with water. Glasses fogged by my own breath. My hat useless now, water finding its way into every corner it should not. It is a tropical moment, the mind alert to every sensation. An initiation into a route, lived without the possibility of calling out to anyone. And I arrived somewhere I had not known existed.

Defeat at the Espinal

Near the pass of Parpers, on the ridge that separates the Marina from the Vallès, there is a broad plain that captivates those of us who travel on foot. It takes its name from a farmhouse, the Espinal, whose fine structure is slowly giving way. We step inside now to witness the stages of its undoing: collapsed walls, windows left forever open, tiles stripped away, noble stone lintels, rotting beams, a catalan vault still holding its red, and the back wall stubbornly standing.

It is worth lingering in the surroundings, noting what remains of the working life of these lands, once set beside the path that climbed up from Barcelona and followed the ridge. Two washbasins survive, one in front of the house and another, older one hidden below. There is also a vat once used for sulphur, to treat the vines that once clothed these sunlit slopes. And the threshing floor is still there, holding on.

Nature makes itself known in a towering pine nearby. The many terraces where the farmer once bent his back have been reclaimed by woodland and scrub: holm oaks, pines, oaks. Seen from a distance, or from above, these open fields form a patchwork of order where birds like to settle. I spend time here too, though I am no bird, drawn in by the shifting colours—green one moment, brown the next.

Below runs the stream, also called the Espinal. You will find me there. Summer shade, murmuring water, hidden sounds. Autumn leaves, and the plane trees taking their leave in colour. Beyond the bridge, scrubland, and a thread of a path that is also a gully, and sometimes disappears altogether. No one comes here looking for mushrooms. Under this cathedral of branches, alone, walking—may it

never end—along the course of the water, where the ground first yields, then pushes back. You can reach the spring of the poplars of Javà, if the vegetation does not turn you away first: lush, thorned, impenetrable. I push through it anyway, a kind of purgatory suited to my own ups and downs, sand underfoot, and, now and then, a squirrel.

The coast of the maritime vineyard

It rained on us as Joan and I walked through Traià, chasing natural sensations now that the paths shine with luminous greens. Along narrow trails through abandoned land that holm oaks and pines have claimed, with a few oaks and others I cannot name. We look for forgotten places, for traces of human work, for the labour of the past. Along the coast, beneath the range formed by the hill of the Rovires, the rounded hill of Martí, the hill of Cabanyes, the hill of Dori, and the hill of the Olivelles and the Roca Negra.

A history of farmers and the steady labour of generations. Not a strip of land here escaped the hoe. And the juice of the grape was the reward earned through effort—not so long ago, either. Look at photographs from the twenties and you will see that these terraces knew nothing of trees, only rows, mules, and baskets gathering the harvest. Josep Pla once described these vineyards as the feature that gave the whole landscape its colour, a shifting, varied kind of music. He noted how each plot had its own well for mixing sulphate and its own small hut—scattered marks of human order that made the land feel humane and companionable, everything neat, measured, and kind.

Now the old labour has given way to forest. In just a few decades the surroundings have changed, and from above you see a dark mass of pines and holm oaks. Walking through, forcing your way into the scrub, you come upon forgotten remains: vineyard huts, washbasins, sulphur tanks. What is left of the abandoned crops is a web of paths, and one of them runs along the slope—I walk it often.

Ahead of me, on this winter afternoon, beneath a clear sky, the sun setting in the west, lie the hill of Cerdanyola, fields and storehouses, a magnificent pine over reeds

stirring in the wind, a fig tree and a solitary oak, and two silver olive trees. Greens and browns gilded by the fading light, in this stretch of gentle labour along the generous stream, dotted with the farmhouses that have shaped this land.

You can walk for a long while through places rarely seen, and find corners that would please anyone who feels at home among natural things. A small bucolic spot on the hill of Roca Negra, marked by a vineyard hut growing straight out of the rock. The hidden pool below the hill of Dori. Springs beside old houses, with plane trees and enormous oaks.

I like ruins, so I go in search of the remains of Sant Jaume de Traià, on a small hill—a nineteenth-century hermitage. I try to imagine life in this spiritual retreat, now sheltered beneath a beautiful pine grove, once in plain sight of anyone travelling from Argentona to Mataró. So much history turned to dust on a single day: the 9th of September, 1881. A man from Mataró recorded that afternoon that the roof of the hermitage of Sant Jaume de Traià, near the Argentona stream, had collapsed—though the image of the saint, he noted, remained untouched.

Ruins, tombs, the dead. A romantic scene. Ubi sunt.

Through the springs

To trace springs and mines and wells and washbasins and ponds that adorn the coastal ranges. Water that was life itself for those who worked these lands — making wine, making charcoal, cutting wood. We love the mountain springs: they grace the landscape among powerful trees, a welcome corner of shade, thick with golden leaves when the cold arrives, and we go out in search of them at breakfast time. Yet they are often wrapped now in wild nature, useless, where once there were fields and your father would work the land. And the village springs, a meeting place beneath the trickle: water to bring the pot to the boil, water for washing, and the ones where women would gossip, at the washhouse, that someone's husband was a bad piece of work. I search for old images, I rummage for those forgotten ones that still hold a trace of memory. To write about springs, as literature — that is what I love.

The memory of water

People of ancient destiny—Iberians on Turó Gros, and older still—let the great, well-placed stones speak for us. Walk the woods of Can Planes. Leave the paths behind and pick your way through the branches, following whatever adventure presents itself. Land abandoned a century ago by those who once worked the vines. A young nature, almost new.

The High Road once ran so close to the church that travellers from Barcelona, bound for France, would stop at the inn. A route for romans, perhaps even for carthaginian elephants; for ill-intentioned armies brought up short by the rock—the Roca—where a castle was raised to keep watch. Medieval times of uncertain loyalties, paid for in blood by the people of the place, when, in a century of swords and lords, men were hanged without hesitation before the castle gates. And another High Road descending to the coast through the pass of Parpers, under the shelter of a hermitage—no more than four walls.

But the water: the memory of water. May life go in search of it and find it along the banks of the Mogent. Water for the gardens of the fertile plain, for farmers full of hope; and for the old man who looks at me and tells me stories of long ago, and the other, up on his tractor, who explains how he found his wife in Òrrius as a young man and marked the occasion by walking the path of Can Barangó. Channels cut by human hands cross the land, drawing water from the river beneath towering plane trees, carrying it beneath the great rock. Once it drove the wheat mill that still stands and can still be visited; now it irrigates the fields.

I watch the water move, slipping through the village half hidden, returning to the light where the Pi Gros stands beside it. In the Roca del Vallès, among the green fields.

Rise and ruin

Up in the mountains for centuries, and then, suddenly—strangers. The iberians did not take kindly to the romans deciding they would be masters in someone else's home, nor to taking orders from them. Revolts came and went like a fever—quiet today, war tomorrow. They would not yield, and that was that. Until one day the generals closed in with their swords, and when it was clear there was nothing left to be done—nothing at all—the iberians came down from the hills and made for the sea, to learn latin.

With peace, some soldiers returned home, others stayed, building lives on plots of land granted to them by the masters of everything. A good country to raise a family, to raise walls beneath the mountains that separated the mare nostrum from the wooded interior—the land of tribes no one quite trusted. Time shaped a town they would call Iluro—houses of masters living off the labor of iberians, worn down, forced to earn their place.

It was no small thing. It had everything the people who had civilized Latium, after their long journey from Troy, knew how to build: the measured order of streets, healing waters, a temple, a market, roads. Centuries passed, and life was good. But it ended, as it does, when other frenzied strangers arrived on horseback with swords, leaving nothing standing. A mound of rubble now crowns this hill overlooking the sea—ancient Iluro, fallen, burned, broken. And the christians already at the gates.

The stream, nothing but sand

I was in Dosrius because I'd walked there from Argentona, straight down the middle of the riverbed. A walk I'd been putting off for two years and a few months, but the moment had finally come—saturday, midday sun, time on my hands, and a taste for adventure. Low-risk, but still a little strange when you don't know the terrain and want to pay attention to every step.

Past Can Matabens now, with its watered-down modernist air—I like it all the same—and a mimosa in bloom that invites you to linger. Around here everything ought to be water, which in a riverbed would be normal enough, but this one is always dry. Years ago, it turns out, someone drilled down and siphoned it off to Barcelona, to cool the people strolling along the Rambla. Now, as you walk, you come across the small structures that shelter the wells, quiet proof of why there's no water to be found.

Reeds and sand everywhere, and now and then a proper path along the banks—though sometimes you just have to walk straight through the sand. Alone, under a sun that makes you want to fall in love, I think about how two centuries ago there was no road, and that to get from Argentona to Dosrius you had to pass exactly where I'm walking now. Sand, with the occasional patch of firm ground. Horses, carts, mud when it rained. An adventure I try to relive by closing my eyes to the factories that scar the landscape now—which I'd rather not dwell on.

You come to the mill of Can Misser Prats—a name now, nothing more, since Prats is long gone and the mill hasn't ground wheat in years. But a black-and-white photograph from a century ago reminds you of when it was alive. Beside it began the High Road to Cardedeu, forgotten today but

once vital for people and goods alike. Then Can Collet, and the Casa Nova. At Can Gemir, a Gothic window sets off the façade. Farmhouses that have seen everything, after centuries rooted in this land.

In the middle of a sea of reeds: a soft wind, the chatter of sparrows, and a faint movement a few metres away. A brown shadow shifting, hard to make out. I stand still as a tree and wait—and what appears is a beautiful male pheasant, edged in red. Just a moment of pure nature, gone as quickly as it comes. This place is home to countless loud, winged creatures: robin, starling, golden oriole, spoonbill, rock thrush, warbler, sparrow, blackbird, turtledove, and the prized cirl bunting. And among the trees: black poplars and pines, oaks, hackberries, plane trees.

On the bank, below the hill of Can Ribot, gleaming white, stands the farmhouse of Can Terrades del Molí. Imposing, medieval—perhaps built atop a roman villa. A solid house, once belonging to people of means: prosperous peasants living off their land and a large wheat mill now swallowed by time and undergrowth, right beside the stream. You can walk across the level ground where the old millpond has been cleared, and picture it as it once was, with its rough-hewn walls—now reduced to a scatter of stones.

Onward along the firm path that follows the stream, through reeds and trees that in autumn glow with dead leaves and colour. A tall pine, a bell tower. On a slope, the tip of a church tells me I'm arriving in Dosrius. And there's Can Tarau, standing watch over the bridge—no small feat to build—over the Rials stream, which winds deep into the wooded ravines of this land of witches.

Montolivet and along the Fluvià

No, I really should not have gone. Everything pointed against it—april, the cruel month, and the longing of lilacs. But error is part of human nature, so I went anyway. It had to be a precise, almost heroic sunday: sun and shade, unhurried, just so. Through the tunnel toward Olot, braking at Les Preses. We find the old inn of Can Limpiu, said to be a decent, tidy place, and park a little further on. Packs on our backs, we walk through a small beech wood along the path, right in the middle of this universal marvel: the Bora Tosca, the vast blast crater left by the Croscat volcano, everything around it buried under a chaos of stone.

Not a scrap of soil in sight, and the farmers had to work day and night hauling volcanic rock just to scratch out a living. Now it is an open-air museum: cleared plots, dry-stone walls, hedges, the pit of hell, huts, a maze of paths. Poetry, if you know how to look. Because looking is not easy, and seeing a miracle is harder still. Perhaps a prayer will help you find the right spot. The philosopher said that one day you turn a corner and your life changes—perhaps you will find that moment here, among the basalt.

We come out onto the old narrow-gauge railway line, full of people on bicycles, well-kept fifty-somethings burning off fat, and grandmothers talking—endlessly—about yesterday. A little further on we leave the crowd behind and head to cross the Fluvià by the Tussols footbridge. Easy enough, though I have seen this river run without fear, and no one crosses here when the water is carrying everything downstream.

Across green plains, we make for Mas Collell and a quieter stretch. Soon we pass through a small gate and head toward the pass of the Roure. Narrow paths thick with oaks,

laid out as if for admiration. We turn left and follow well-marked trails toward the plain beneath the hill of Sant Valentí, a welcoming place that even has a railing. An old man comes over and begins to talk. His father, he says, was a man of ideas—fixed ones. He has ideas too, but has not followed his father's path. He tests them, tries them out, sees how they hold. And he recommends that method, for what it is worth. Those who make their living from their ideas, he adds, will not like it much.

We turn back, our feet content in this place they did not know, beneath Puig Cornador and toward the well-known Bare Mountain—bare, that is, meaning treeless. Though it is something of a trick; there is hardly a stretch without shade. A little further on we reach the old volcano, now the hill of Montolivet, once called Puig de la Rovira, after a farmhouse that still lingers nearby. In the seventeenth century, Capuchin monks changed the name to the biblical Montolivet. The people of Olot were pleased—after all, the Mount of Olives is where, any day now, God will set everything right on the day of final judgment. And the people of Olot need not go to the Holy Land; they have a branch office here.

We stop to admire—and we do admire—the optical telegraph tower placed here for its clear line of sight to the Murrià tower, another link in the chain running down from Barcelona. Someone has bolted on an ugly metal addition that spoils the nineteenth-century silhouette—such are the times, the natural, electrical evolution of a system that was never very useful to begin with. Whoever was stationed in this tower must have loved the view over the Olot valley, the mountains, the river. A privilege, compared with the poor souls posted to optical towers out in La Mancha, half-starving.

We descend the hill, passing orchards bursting under the spring sun—lettuces, onions, tomatoes announcing themselves. The forgotten remains of the houses of La Costa. Another "costa" by a river, like the one that gave my family its name, also on the Fluvià, near Besalú, seven hundred years ago.

We reach the flat. A fine old bridge over the river, near the shrine of Mare de Déu dels Desemparats and not far from Pequín. The promenade of Sant Roc, long as the night—I have walked it in autumn too, through fallen, broken leaves. I close my eyes: black and white, and a woman in a trench coat comes toward me from a distance, closer and closer. She passes; her gaze does not meet mine. Now we greet Saint Roc at the hermitage he presides over—he is also, incidentally, the owner of the mill, the weir, and the springs.

We take in the fine sight of the mill and the weir on this sunny sunday morning: blue sky, birdsong, and the voice of the water. Sit here and time stops—but you have to move on, because something is waiting around the corner. I follow a generous, narrow path, the kind I like, along the right bank of the Fluvià for quite a while, until I reach the Tussols footbridge we crossed earlier.

And then a small piece of magic: we come upon an old man, well into his eighties, repairing the spring of the Gruta with a hoe, after the winter floods buried it. Frail but full of energy, moving stones, clearing mud. I go over and thank him for this anonymous labour. "I enjoy it," he says. I encourage him, and he tells me his life story—hunger, hardship, scraping by, a childhood poor, then poorer still. I listen and learn, as I once did from a wise old farmer—people who have been through everything and still come out content. And then, without warning, he tells me he was a

bullfighter, a great one from Olot—Nardo—and that someone has written a book about his life.

You have to go through the world with your mouth open; there are not many like my friend Joaquim Soy. Next week I will buy the book—eight days have passed already—and you should read it too, this fragment of a man's life, and of an entire era.

With Nardo's words still echoing, we take a narrow path that keeps to the river, with the occasional turning toward hidden pools. A glance at the pool of Casa Gran. Then we step back onto the old, forgotten railway line, and stop for a vermouth at the former Codella halt. That is enough for today—we leave it here, among the roses.

We went on a pilgrimage

We set out across the plain of Gitanos, in Dosrius, through wide woodland, with the Rials stream running low and quiet today. We leave aside the path to the spring of Sot and take a more inviting trail instead. And memory steps forward, summoned by the image of a very young boy. Some sixty years ago, my grandparents brought me here to the spring, and just before reaching it we came upon some roma girls smashing snakes with stones. It must have struck the short-trousered city boy deeply, because I still remember the fear.

We climb along a path that is nearly a thousand years old, once a high road from a time when life was lived on foot. We cross the road and pass through stretches with no name, until, quite suddenly, we enter a woodland paradise, dense with trees and distant light. In the hollow of Can Busquets stands a ruined house you feel compelled to touch, almost reverently. The bread oven tells the whole story. Sacred walls of old labour, terraces now unreadable beneath every shade of green.

After trails and pinewoods that are slowly dying, we come out onto a path and find Sant Sebastià close at hand—that hermitage long abandoned, with only a few stones still standing, and yet somehow it will not quite release us. A formidable watchtower. And a sky within reach, wide with sun and cloud. The sea comes into view, and the eye opens across the whole mountain range. In remembrance of this hero, whom arrows could not kill—patron and sovereign martyr—we ask your mercy.

We go on and soon reach the Torrassa del Moro, a tower, and a roman one at that. A place chosen by people long gone to keep watch over the Vallès. Coming upon the monument is a strange experience, because, without warning, history

descends on you as your eyes follow the granite blocks at its base, so finely cut, so harmonious in their Roman workmanship. You cannot help admiring work well done, even thinking of Virgil, who sang of men standing armed in empty towers, waiting for the enemy. Above, the labours of the Middle Ages, in poorly laid stones, speak only of ruin.

We have to keep moving; it is getting late, and the rice is waiting at home. I cook it by half-burning the onion, the way my grandmother did—she was from the Empordà. Thinking of the sofregit, I realise I have once again left the spring of Merla unresolved, clearly marked on every map and yet impossible to find; perhaps it is nothing more than a damp patch in the corner of a dry gully.

And now we reach the plain of the Garrofers. If you do not know the garrofer, it is an evergreen tree, always green, rarely more than seven metres tall. Its fruit is the carob, a legume rich in sugars, once used to feed livestock. In lean years, dried carobs were eaten by rich and poor alike. I still remember the faint sweetness of that very dark brown pod.

The carob tree has a smooth, thick trunk. Sturdy, not too tall—an eminently suitable tree, it must be said, for hanging oneself. You can trust the branch not to bend or break—reliable enough that we now pass through the place known as el Penjat dels Garrofers, the Hanged Man of the Carob Trees. The maps say as much, which suggests that at some point people practiced that old method which settles, with immediate effect, the particular affliction so dear to the romantic poets. A schoolteacher once told me that in the Empordà, when the tramuntana blows, farmers lose their minds, and you can always find one hanging from a carob or an olive tree—the olive does the job well enough too.

And so we make our way back down, through holm oak undergrowth and a hesitant little pine grove that seems unsure of itself, as if it had wandered somewhere it does not

belong. The foresters have declared war on the pine now, since apparently everything must be holm oak—that most regrettable of trees.

Romantic ruins

Medieval at its core, shaped by the passage of centuries. These days it opens to visitors on sundays, and it's well worth the trip. The house belonged to country gentry, and to true gentry as well—people who made their fortune in the brandy trade. They were called Bellvitges, though over time the name wore down to Miravitges. It seems the people of these valleys were a little hard of hearing: the Urrútias, too, were pared back to Ruti.

A hundred years ago an artist lived here, Antoni Ros Güell—painter and, they say, set designer. He scattered these mountains with colour in oils: fine landscapes that ended up hanging in solemn dining rooms.

Ah, Antoni. One day you decided that the small hill behind your house—which was also yours—had to become something. Scenography again, only this time not in papier-mâché but in stone: a garden brought into harmony. You loved the fountain, a place of calm, with benches and shade and the soft sound of falling water. And the afternoons spent there with friends—rose bushes in every colour nature could offer gathered around you. Nearby, a small retreat for lovers of a later generation, and beyond it a spring, tucked beneath dense rock, that some discerning poet ought to have set to verse. Paths climb upward, and at the top, a pleasure dome ordained by the master of the house: a gazebo, a lofty little stronghold, the keystone of the whole garden, held on four pillars—sky and clouds, sunlight, and a view that stretches for miles.

A few stones remain. The forest is swallowing it whole, with vandals lending a hand. I draw closer, because I feel at home among ruins. And I take notes for the great book of mosses that adorn, and ivies that undo.

Paths of Figaró

A cold day in the Congost valley, though the sun soon softened our first steps out of Figaró. We set off near the source of the Gitanes, following the river as it runs full and urgent. What a change from the gentle stream of three weeks ago—today the water rings out and leaps over stones and pools, skirting the medieval houses of Gallicant at the wide bend before La Garriga.

We climb with the crags of Bertí ahead of us until we reach the fine plain of Ca n'Oliveras, a solid farmhouse whose owners have laid out a charming, romantic garden. We admire it from a distance and press on toward a lookout once opened by local lords over the valley. The path stretches ahead, red earth glowing in the sun, while to the east Figaró clings to the mountainside. These terraces once fed farmers, before Barcelona's bourgeoisie claimed them with the coming of the railway. Houses rose in the style of two centuries ago, on land where rows of lettuces had once grown.

We pass beneath the Bac, which gives its name to the stream running through the ravine—a place well known among climbers for its rock needles. A waterfall might catch a visitor off guard, though not today; at the crossroads we turn right and begin the descent. After crossing the stream—a tangle of water, greenery, and branches—we follow a path that hangs halfway up the sunlit slope of Santa Eugènia. It's a narrow, beautiful stretch, opening onto views of Montseny and running along old vineyard terraces abandoned for decades. Dry-stone walls still hold the land in place, though some are precarious now, undone by ivy. Mud and water pool along the path, and a fallen tree gives us some trouble—no small matter for walkers of a certain age.

Crossing the railway line, we return to the bank of the Congost, where a fine pool gathers beneath a waterfall that falls with a steady roar, just across from the rector's house. A few steps further stands the church of Santa Eugènia del Congost, where history presses close. Four medieval houses remain, their arched doorways intact; one still has its entrance raised to the first floor, a precaution from more troubled times. This was once a stop along the High Road, beneath stone walls and under the constant threat of bandits.

We pass through a tunnel to cross the road and find the steps up to the quarry of Can Pere Moliner. It is still in use, though quiet and orderly now, with a stone hut and two springs. From here a long, level path runs through Camp Roig, where everything takes on that deep red hue. We come across terraces of unusual height, their retaining walls under strain, already showing signs of collapse and ruin. It's a landscape I know well—autumns and springs spent on this wild, north-facing slope, rich with vegetation you wouldn't expect.

A sudden, steep descent brings us to the Vallcàrquera stream, which we follow down to its waterfall. Today, with so much water, the ferns are thriving. We turn back along the track toward Sant Pere de Vallcàrquera, climb up to the upper part of Figaró, and look again at the handsome houses we had seen earlier from afar. We go down by the Angelus stairway and take our leave of this village with medieval roots, which still keeps, along the old High Road, houses with arched doorways bearing their owners' names, the remains of a flour mill, and an inn—shuttered and barred now, left in shadow.

The romans found hot water

It sprang from the earth—and here they stayed. Stones remain that seem to remember it: worn, reddened, still holding the murmur of Latin the Iberians learned, the language by which they were made "civilised." I walk the path that looks out over the town, above the river and the memory of walls that, by the eleventh century, already enclosed the houses of Caldes de Montbui against fear. These were busy, working times: a jewish quarter, the trade in red cloth, the vine, and a thirteenth-century bridge that eased the passage of everything and everyone, up and down and beyond.

But it is the nineteenth century that weighs most heavily on this place. The french spared nothing, and the carlist wars brought no peace either. Once, the rebels carried off the village blacksmiths for refusing to forge three thousand bullets; they kidnapped landowners too, sending them back lighter in the purse. The warlord Tristany himself spent a night here with three thousand men, and it was the farmers who paid the price.

Even without the romans, the water kept running hot, though half forgotten. In Caldes, as in Argentona—my neighbouring village—it is water that draws the town back into the current of history. People come up from Barcelona seeking relief, convinced these warm springs can set them right, given a hundred litres and enough faith. And so, by the mid-nineteenth century, after years of war and hardship when few could even afford a bath, the true business of Caldes begins: an organised effort to gather the small change of anyone who still had something left to spend.

But everything runs its course. As the century draws to a close, the outsiders stop coming. So what remains for the

people of Caldes? The answer is simple: the girls go off to the city into service, the boys to quarry stone—because for years, stone is what many of them would live on.

Siberia of Montbui

Between Caldes de Montbui and Riells, at Can Regassol development, I set out along broad tracks, dropping down through low scrub. It's easy to see why the maps call this place Siberia: when the season turns, the cold must settle hard here. These are lands of wide, abandoned fields, once worked from the farmhouse of Rosàs—a solid building still standing, though without purpose now, its people long gone.

For several kilometres I walk under pines and holm oaks, through the woods of Rosàs and Can Vidal. I come to a wide path, and beside it the Parc de les Olors, a place given over to a rich variety of cultivated plants. I go on along the slopes of La Pelada and into a fine stretch of woodland at Can Ribes, though here the landscape bears the scars of something like a small tornado: dozens of trees lie uprooted and snapped, making the going difficult. Shadow and heather keep me company, along with the tracks of wild boar that roam here freely at night.

Following winding footpaths, I come out onto a broad track at the edge of a housing estate. From here you have to take the old path behind the houses that climbs to the castle of Montbui. The ascent is awkward, over loose, stubborn rock, until at last the summit reveals what remains of a true medieval frontier fortress, dating back to the tenth century. Names echo from that time—Gombau, and Guisla, wife of Mir Geribert, a man of such restless, violent temper that he managed to enrage the Count of Barcelona enough to be stripped of his castle.

These stones passed through the hands of various lineages until the fateful year of 1714, when the king ordered the fortress torn down—it stood in the way—and it has

remained like that ever since. Nearby stands a chapel so old it predates the romanesque, a trace of a rural parish that once served the scattered hamlets, before worship shifted to the church at Can Carreras, where the climb is gentler. History passing through.

A morning in the sun along the Ter

This is the last excursion, because the sun no longer lets you live, and we will soon be retreating indoors in something close to fear. We meet as planned and drive to Torelló, where the day begins. At the station we board the train to Sant Quirze de Besora. A small surprise when the ticket inspector appears flanked by two men carved from stone, in case anyone has forgotten their manners.

The walk begins in the village just mentioned, and at once we catch sight of the lovely river that will keep us company for several hours, on this fine morning of blue sky and pleasantly cool air—it is not yet eight. The path along the Ter leads us past a string of textile mills, once clustered along the river to harness its force and spare themselves the coal that arrived, at great cost, from England. It will be a day of water and industrial memory.

We meet the first of them in the heart of Sant Quirze—a village that shares its name with a saint who, together with little Julita, was martyred in roman times. Before us stands the weir of Can Guixà, which once channelled water to the factory built in 1853—still standing, but empty now, a stone ghost whose chimney was lost to fire long ago. We press on and, in a curious grove of american cane—bamboo, as it is also called—we come upon a small, neat chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Montserrat, the Rose of April. From its layout, you would guess it once belonged to the factory owners' garden.

We pass the industrial estate of Foradada, where the group splits—some sticking to the road, others taking a rough path tight against the Ter. We cross the small cluster of houses at Foradada, a medieval site where a flour mill once worked on water falling from the Mir waterfall. From

there we follow a track beneath the cliffs of the Grau, rounding a great bend in the river along the path of the Matxos. The braver ones cross by stepping stones—the water is low today—and climb up to where the rest of us wait.

Time for a light meal, eaten sitting along the edge of the path beneath the hill of the Cogulera, looking out toward the Bascanó range. Then we drop down to the plains of Solà and walk on, happily enough, along a path shaded by a high canopy that keeps the sun off us for a while. Unfamiliar greens, the scent of everlasting flowers, and, closer now, the sound of water. Across the river comes the murmur of a hydroelectric plant—that invention which has made life so much easier.

We pass beneath a railway bridge of considerable height, and the vegetation along the Ter grows more inviting, the river widening here and there. More noise reaches us from another weir, the Caseta, another modest fragment of industry. If the path has been gentle and shaded so far, we are now forced up a sun-beaten, rather unpleasant slope made of the spoil thrown down by whoever built the railway above us. A little worn, we rest beneath a stand of holm oaks, where a trace of coolness lingers.

We talk about the notable houses ahead—Espona and Casa Nova—set in a magnificent plain of grain fields. A short climb brings us near a house we can barely see, though we clearly hear the bark of an unwelcoming dog. This is the Hostalot, which, as the name suggests, once offered shelter to muleteers and travellers crossing these mountains. We go on along a rocky path fitted here and there with wooden handrails, just in case.

We pass under another railway bridge, oddly placed, forcing us down into the bed of the Batallola stream—dry today, though no doubt another matter in the rain. Once

through the mud, we skip the spring of Berga but do reach the spring of Conill, whose tap dispenses its supposedly beneficial water. Then comes a splendid stretch of path, something of a roller coaster, to the annoyance of our guide, who had promised us a flat route—clearly not the case. The effort is rewarded with a wide view over river, forest, and mountain, and the island of Mambla, another former industrial enclave with its own canal.

A short descent brings us to the cemetery of Borgonyà, where we take advantage of the shade for a well-earned rest. We return to the river, and another passage beneath the railway leads us to the start of the great Borgonyà canal, which once diverted water to the Fabra i Coats factory. A world of its own: an industrial colony with neat workers' houses, company shop, church, and a priest on hand to hear confessions—of work as well as of life.

We cross the canal and walk beneath a dense avenue of plane trees that lets no sunlight through. Nearby is the football pitch, flooded just months ago in the storms. A sign tells us football was already played here in 1895, one of the first places in Catalonia to take it up, thanks to the british engineers at the factory. They played tennis too—ladies in short skirts—while local farmwomen watched in astonishment, and the farmhands no less so. We pass behind the imposing block of factory buildings and above the canal, where the water rejoins the Ter after turning the turbines that once drove the machines.

We continue through a particularly beautiful stretch, the weir of Vilaseca, where the river widens and the sound of water stays with us. A small bridge crosses the canal, and a raised path runs above the Ter. By now patience is wearing thin—the sun shows no mercy—but we know lunch is close. The abandoned buildings of the old Vilaseca factory, and the inn of the same name, are waiting for us, forks ready.

Full stomachs, merciless sun, and we carry on along the Vilaseca canal to where it rejoins the Ter—helped, if that is the word, by wooden steps that hinder almost as much as they help—past the spring of Puigroví and the spring of Dalt, both of doubtful virtue, until at last we reach Torelló. Time for farewells, embraces, kisses—and until next season.

Landscapes

The journey has had, this time, an unusual protagonist.
I have not travelled the roads of Spain on foot or on horseback;
I have not endured the pitiless roadside inns,
the April downpours, the deep snows, the treeless sun, or the men.
And yet I have discovered a geography hidden within history,
a renewed gaze upon lost places:
the wonder of adobe houses, fertile Mediterranean gardens,
flocks of sheep arriving, the rain-soaked green of the north,
and the plains of wheat and of will.
You seem left behind; I will be a passenger
on the boats of Alconétar, straining against the Tagus;
along a stony, wearisome, mountainous road.
I must go to La Peza to feel the water in the cistern;
to the pass of San Adrián, poised between two worlds;
to the arid hills of the Guadix basin, where the lizard darts;
to the ravine of the Gate of Sand;
to the cold voices on the Tablada
and silver lights on the lagoon of Fuente de Piedra.
I will cry out in the ancient forests of Galicia, among sacred yews;
in the solitudes of a forgotten place in La Mancha;
I will seek safe passage through the wastes of the Monegros;
the Virgin of France will receive me on her crag.
At the end, at the end, the campo de estrellas.